

# **Interviewing Skills for Security Officers**

by

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An **interview** can be defined as, a face-to-face controlled conversation which has an investigative purpose. The primary goal of an interview is to obtain information from an individual regarding an incident or situation. This is achieved through a structured process in which questions and answers are exchanged between the interviewer and the interviewee ( or subject ). Security Officers routinely conduct interviews throughout their careers, maybe even on a daily basis depending upon the nature of the assignment. The Security Officer may have to interview the witnesses or victims of an incident, crime, or accident. These individuals may be employees of the protected company or members of the general public. Regardless of who the interview is conducted with, the goal will always be the same, obtaining specific information or facts regarding a situation or incident.

Another form of the interview process, which is conducted with criminal suspects, is known as an “interrogation”. Interrogations are a type of formal interview that seeks to ascertain the facts of a crime, secure the guilt of, or confession from, a criminal suspect. Interrogations are generally conducted by Law Enforcement officials following the arrest of a criminal suspect, or during the course of a criminal case. Interviews are not interrogations. Interviews are conducted with witnesses and victims, interrogations with criminals suspects. Since it is unlikely for the Security Officer to conduct criminal interrogations they will not be covered in this text.

## **The Security Officer as Interviewer**

The success of any interviewer with obtaining the desired information from an interviewee, will depend upon the interviewer’s professionalism, skill, and experience. There are specific characteristics associated with the professional interviewer. These characteristics include:

- The interviewer must maintain a professional appearance, including clothes and grooming.
- The interviewer’s goal is to gather information.
- The interviewer treats the interviewee with respect, and in return will be respected. Never judge or ridicule the interviewee.
- Attention is always placed on being considerate, courteous, and understanding.
- The professional interviewer maintains his / her focus and objectivity.
- Emphasis is placed on total listening throughout the entire interview.
- The professional interviewer never lies or makes false promises to the person being

interviewed.

- Information received from the person being interviewed is never misquoted or misrepresented.

## **Interview Types**

There are basically two types of interviews: **formal** and **informal**. The formal interview is conducted in a very business like manner. Emphasis is placed on the overall structure of the interview with regards to setting, appearance, questions asked, etc. Formal interviews are generally conducted in an office or room which contains few distractions. This type of setting is advantageous for concentration during the interview. The way in which the interview will be conducted is usually highly structured, and questions are generally prepared in advance. This type of interview is most often associated with employment, counseling, etc. Unless the Security Officer's duties include hiring, counseling, or other administrative functions this type of interview format may not be used often.

The informal interview is the type more likely to be utilized by security personnel. The informal interview is generally one which occurs spontaneously, at the scene of an incident for example. Less emphasis will be placed on the interviews overall structure, however, the emphasis placed on information gathering will remain the same. These types of interviews are commonly referred to as "field interviews", because they often occur outdoors, or in public areas.

## **Conducting the Interview**

The primary objective of an interview is to obtain information. To be effective at conducting interviews, the Security Officer must first develop some basic skills regarding the process. The following are some basic points to remember when conducting an interview:

- **Be prepared for the interview**

Approach the interview with the goal of obtaining the necessary information. Have a firm understanding why you are conducting the interview. Anticipate the type of information you are likely to receive, and the questions you may have to ask.

- **Begin the interview by putting the interviewee at ease**

Attempt to put the interviewee at ease. If the interviewee is upset, allow them a moment to calm down. Be friendly and show respect. If possible offer them a drink of water, or a chair to sit down in.

- **Be conversational**

An interview is a two-way communication. Don't attempt to just ask questions and expect answers, allow the interview to be a conversation. Talk with the interviewee in an informal, sociable manner.

Don't conduct the interview as though it was an interrogation.

- **Establish trust and show interest**

Be personable and show the interviewee that you have an interest in the information they possess, even if the information is of little value. Interviewing may be a routine duty of yours, but the interviewee may not engage in the activity often, so show that you are someone they can trust.

- **Encourage the interviewee to talk**

After opening the interview allow the interviewee to relate the details of the story completely before asking questions. Starting in this manner will allow the interviewee to relate the information as he remembers it, giving you time to listen, take notes, and think of questions to ask. After the individual finishes, ask questions that will clarify points that you don't understand, are unclear, or issues that require more detail.

- **Actively listen**

Listening to what the interviewee is saying is as important as the questions you ask him / her.

- **Don't criticize or prejudge**

Don't criticize, judge, ridicule, etc., the interviewee, his or her emotions, situation, or the information they give you. Your personal opinions of the interviewee and his / her information are not important. Obtaining facts from the interview is important.

- **Stay in control**

You are the one conducting the interview, not the interviewee. Establish command of the process from the very beginning. Keep the interviewee on track. The interviewee is likely to be nervous and may ramble or interject unimportant information into the interview.

- **Don't rush the interview**

Allow enough time for the interview. If the interviewee feels they are being rushed they may feel that you are not truly interested in the information. This may limit the amount of information the interviewee is willing to give, or that you receive. The interview is not over until you have obtained all necessary information, or the interviewee refuses to talk further.

- **Take notes**

Record all facts stated by the interviewee. Take notes casually, and write while the interviewee is talking. Don't interrupt the interviewee to catch up your notes, learn to write rapidly. Don't let your note taking interfere with listening. Make sure your notes are accurate, clear, and legible.

Information obtained during the interview will generally become the basis for either an incident report or a witness statement. If possible, consider recording the interview by using a portable tape recorder and transcribe the notes later.

- **Ask easily understood questions**

Speak on the same level as the interviewee. Word questions in language that the interviewee will understand. Don't ask confusing questions or attempt to "mix up" the interviewee to see if he / she is lying.

## **Field Note Taking**

The most important aspect of any written report is that it contains the correct information. Incidents can occur at any time or place. Incidents can be simple in nature and easy to explain or very complex containing extensive facts. When incidents do occur, it is crucial that the important facts regarding the incident be collected and recorded in a written incident report. Preparing incident reports may take place several hours after the incident is over. At this time the details surrounding the incident may be harder to recall, and persons involved may not be present for questioning. One way of insuring that all essential facts are obtained is through the use of field note taking. The practice of note taking is strongly encouraged and all Security Officers should have a pen and note pad in their possession for this reason.

Basically, there are two different types of written notes: **rough notes** and **final notes**. Rough notes are those notes which are taken, on scene, at the time of incident. These type of notes generally list information in a very abbreviated form. Neatness is not important when preparing rough notes. However, correctness of the information is important because these notes will serve as the foundation for your final written report. Rough notes should include details such as: names and descriptions of persons involved, dates and times, descriptions of surroundings or location, the correct sequence of events, etc.

Final notes are prepared after the incident has ended and it becomes time to write an incident report. Final notes are prepared in a neater, more organized, format using the information contained in your rough notes. Your final notes should list information in great detail because they will serve as the outline which will assist in preparing the written incident report.

Another effective method of note taking involves the use of a portable tape recorder. Today, small micro-tape recorders are inexpensive and capable of recording a two hour conversation on one micro cassette tape.

Once the final written incident report has been prepared, final notes should be retained for future reference. Some security companies require that your final notes be attached to the incident report itself, some companies do not. Regardless of whether you are required to submit your final notes or not, they should be maintained for some period of time as your personal record of the incident.